

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF BUDDHIST LINKS  
BETWEEN SRI LANKA AND ARAKAN

By  
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Arakan (or Rakhine, in the Arakanese language) is the region occupying three hundred and sixty miles (c. 600 km) of the northeastern Bay of Bengal coast. Situated between India (the present-day Bangladesh) and Burma proper, Arakan has served historically as a vital conduit for the propagation of Indian culture, art, and religion throughout Southeast Asia. Because of this critical geographic position, Arakan's history has been intertwined with both the fortunes of the Hindu and the Muslim dynasties of eastern India and those of the Burmese kings of Pagan, Ava, Pegu and Amarapura.

The historic boundaries of Arakan have expanded or shrunk with the military prowess and administrative abilities of the various Arakanese kings: in time of greatness, the Kingdom of Arakan extended even to Chittagong (well into Bengal), and encompassed about twice the territory of the present Burmese state of Arakan.

According to the Arakanese chronicles, the region's earliest inhabitants were the *Raksha orbilu* (referring, possibly, to negrito aborigines of uncertain origin.) Subsequent waves of immigration included tribals such as the Mros and Saks, followed by Chins, Khamis, Daignets and Chaungthas, the descendants of whom remain to this day in the more isolated, hilly areas of Arakan.

The local chronicles make much of the coming to Arakan of Indo-Aryan peoples from the Gangetic Plain, and the founding of the cities of Dhanyadi and Vesali in the foothills above the Kaladan River Valley, some fifty miles upriver from the present city of Sittwe (Akyab).

If the Mahamuni legend as related in the ancient manuscript entitled *Sappadadamapakarana* is largely historically accurate, Buddhism has a particularly long history in Arakan: according to these tales, Chandasurya, king of Dhanyawadi (the first Arakanese capital) during Buddha's lifetime, was graced by a personal visit from Lord Buddha. In reality, however, King Chandasurya did not ascend the throne of Arakan until 146 A.D., some six hundred years after the death of Buddha.

But in *Sappadadamapakarana*, the Buddha, with his retinue of five hundred *rahans* (Burmo-Rakhine for the Pali *arahat*), flew through the skies from India, to preach a great sermon on Kyautaw Hill (near Dhanyawadi). The Buddha's week-long visit was a great success: the King, his court and all his subjects were passionately converted to the new faith. Before departing, the king prevailed upon the Buddha to allow an exact likeness of himself to be made as a continual reminder of the truth and goodness of his teachings. The Buddha agreed, and with considerable help from the gods, the inhabitants of Dhanyadi cast a bronze image under the Buddha's personal supervision. After the sacred image was finished, it was installed with much pomp and ceremony on a small hill close to the city. This statue known as the Mahamuni Buddha became famous for its magical powers for ages afterwards.

With the passage of time, that site became a major religious centre for the Arakanese as well as for pilgrims from neighbouring Buddhist states who, understandably, were extremely envious of the Mahamuni image. There are records which state that various kings of the historic Burmese capitals —Sri Ksettra, Pagan and Pegu— had mounted periodic forays into Arakan with the expressed intention of carrying off the Mahamuni image, considered by the Arakanese being the palladium of their kingdom, for themselves.

Many of the Arakanese chronicles emphasize Gautama Buddha's visit to Arakan, dating the arrival of Buddhism at Dhanyawadi to the lifetime of the Great Master. In the "Vesali and Mahimsaka Chronicle"—one of more than forty ancient palm-leaf manuscripts still extant relating the traditional history of Arakan—the place-name "Mahimsakamandala" appears, corresponding to the area of greater Arakan. In both the Lankan *Mahavamsa* and the Burmese *Sassanavamsa* are found

references to the Buddhist mission to Mahimsakamandala dispatched by Emperor Asoka and led by the Venerable Maharevata.

The later copper-plate inscriptions of the Vesali King Niti Candra (520-575 AD ??) recording "the perpetual deeds of merit and charity done by the king in solemn devotion towards the Buddha" constitute further evidence of a comparatively early Buddhist presence in Arakan (relative to Burma, if not to Lanka).

We also have other such indicators: the Sanskrit "Ananda Candra" inscription on the Vesali pillar now preserved at the Shitthaung temple of Mrauk-U, the last capital of Arakan (15th-18th centuries AD), and epigraphically dated to the early 8th century A.D., enumerates the list of all kings —Dhanyawadi, as well as Vesali— who were believed to have ruled over the area prior to King Ananda Candra of Vesali.

If we did an estimate based on this kingly genealogy, rather arbitrarily lending to each ruler an average tenure of twenty years, the reign of King Candradaya of Vesali —inscribed on the Shitthaung pillar as "the good", and "the benevolent"— can be placed somewhere near the end of the second or the beginning of the third century A.D.

The use of these particular two epithets suggests a royal Buddhist affiliation, in which case Buddhism would have certainly been prevalent in Arakan by the 2nd century A.D. However, Buddhism is strongly believed to have come to Arakan at a considerably earlier date:

According to our method of chronologically de-coding the Shitthaung pillar, it would seem that Dhanyawadi was the capital of Arakan until about 370 AD, followed by Vesali until at least A.D.597. In both cases, the archaeological remains of the two cities reveal an outer city wall and an inner moated city surrounding a palace site where royalty and officials resided. Commoners occupied and cultivated rice within the confines of the outer city.

Vesali, the larger of the two cities, covered an area of 2.7 square miles. Remains of stone steps formerly leading to a pier may be seen at low tide on the northwestern side of the city. Vesali was once a notable trading port: according to the the chronicles "as many as a thousand

annually". Under the founding Candra Dynasty (A.D.788-957), Vesali was a prosperous Hindu-style Bengali kingdom.

Numerous Brahmanical silver coins have been found in around the Vesali city site. On some coins there is an undecipherable Nagari inscription. Stone statues from both the Hindu and Buddhist pantheon, dating as far back as the fifth century A.D., have been recovered in the vicinity of Dhanyawadi and Vesali. Although cruder than Indian work, Pala and Gupta influences are clearly evident. It would appear that Hinduism and Buddhism (possibly of the Mahayana lineage) existed side by side in ancient Arakan. Better evidence should arise from excavations being carried out and planned by Burma's Department of Archaeology at Dhanyadi and Vesali, although no significant finds have thus far been reported.

In the middle of B.C. 3rd century<sup>1</sup> during Devanampya Tissa's rule, the great Buddhist missionary Thera Mahinda arrived in Lanka: in short order, Buddhism gained the status of state religion there. The Mahavihara Buddhist centre was well-established at Anuradhapura by the close of the 3rd century B.C.<sup>2</sup> A century later, Vattagamini Abbaya (29-17 B.C.)<sup>3</sup> built the Abhayagiri Vihara, a second major centre of monastic Buddhist learning in Anuradhapura.

By the close of the first century B.C., there was a surfeit of important events in Anuradhapura: the city was ruled by five Hindu Tamil kings from 43 to 29 B.C., and the Buddhist King Vattagamini went into hiding. In 13 B.C., Mahaculika Mahatissa was succeeded by Vattagamini Abhaya's son, Coranaga. Coranga was hostile to Buddhism and destroyed eighteen viharas, where he had been denied shelter earlier when he was staging a rebellion against his cousin, Mahaculika Mahatissa (B.C.17-3).<sup>4</sup>

During this era of disturbances the country was ravaged by a famine, popularly known as the Brahmana Tissa famine or *Brahminityasya*: according to the myths, starving people were compelled to commit such atrocities as killing—and then eating—those same Buddhist monks whom they had previously venerated. With or without cannibalism, thousands of Buddhist monks and lay-people doubtless perished. Viharas were deserted, even the Mahavihara was abandoned to the jungle and the Mahathupa lay in complete neglect. Many monks left the island for India. The country was physically and spiritually devastated.<sup>5</sup>

Elder Sinhalese monks perceived that the future of Buddhism was endangered, since the continuation of the oral tradition of conveying the *Tripitaka* from teacher to pupil appeared no longer possible in such a tragic and murderous period. Attempting to safely preserve the Teachings of Lord Buddha in a time of chaos, the far-sighted mahatheras —under the patronage of the local chief— assembled at Aluvihara at Matale (in the south of the island), and for the first time in Lankan history, committed to writing the whole of the *Tripitaka*, along with the full commentaries, *in order that the True Doctrine might endure.*<sup>6</sup>

In the A.D. first century, dissension began to show up in the Sangha, which had till then had been united under the influence of the Mahavihara. Later, the Dhammaruci sect (the Abhayagiri Vihara group) separated from Mahavihara and founded Jetavana vihara, which eventually became Mahayana-oriented.

According to the Arakanese Chronicles, Sri Lanka and Arakan religious exchanges began from the second century A.D.<sup>7</sup> During the reign of King Suriyasiri (A.D. 201-221),<sup>8</sup> twelve Arakanese monks led by Nanasiridhipati Mahatera were sent to Sri Lanka as missionaries, after a period of Hindu ascendance there.

According to the *Culavamsa*, Vijayabahu I (A.D. 1065-1120) sent envoys with valuable gifts to Anirudda, the king of Ramanyadesa (Pagan), seeking assistance against Cola invaders. (No indication of Anirudda's assistance, if any, has been found.)

K.L.Hazra says, "during this time, Theravada Buddhism was in a flourishing condition in Lower Burma. The conquest of Thaton in A.D. 1057 by Pagan marks as a landmark in Burmese history, and Pagan eventually evolved into a famous Buddhist centre in South-East Asia."<sup>9</sup>

According to the Arakanese Chronicles, the Kingdom of Arakan conducted religious exchanges with Sri Lanka during this same period, although Sri Lankan sources are silent on this matter. But Arakanese chronicles note the sending of religious envoys to Arakan by the King of Sri Lanka, during the reign of Datharaja (A.D. 1123-1139).<sup>10</sup> The delegation sent by Datharaja was comprised of twenty-seven monks, headed by the Venerable Atulavijaya Mahathera.<sup>11</sup>

The Polonnaruva stone inscription of the Velaikkaras (A.D. 1137-1157)<sup>12</sup> mentions a purification campaign conducted within three sects in Sri Lanka during the reign of Vijayabahu I, with the help of Sangha delegates from *Arumana*. (According to the Arakanese chronicles, *Arumana* can be one of the names for Arakan.)

Later, King Nga-ra-man (who in 1156, succeeded his father Min-zu-thein, who had established his capital at Parein) sent a delegation of 36 Buddhist monks, led by Ven.Uttara Dhamma, to Parakramabahu I (1153-1186).<sup>13</sup> But the period between Vijayabahu I and Parakramabahu I can be considered as a dark chapter in Sri Lankan history. According to K.L.Hazra, "during this period neither Burmese sources such as the *Sassanavamsa* and "the Glass Palace Chronicle", nor Sinhalese sources like the *Culavamsa* mention any religious or political contact between Sri Lanka and Burma".<sup>14</sup>

The Golden Age of Mrauk-u, extending from the fifteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth century, was also a high point of cooperation between Arakan and Sri Lanka. Considerable evidence indicates the close political, cultural and religious ties then existing between these two countries: King Ba Saw Phru (1459-1482) received the Tripitakas from Sri Lanka in A.D.1476<sup>15</sup> and in return, sent a religious delegation to Lanka led by the Ven. Siddharta. An ola leaf manuscript, the Kaladora Grant<sup>16</sup> found in Sri Lanka, refers to religious intercourse between Lanka and *Rakkhangapura*<sup>17</sup> (Arakan) during the sixteenth century A.D. Such information is corroborated by the *Culavamsa*, the *Sulupujavaliya* and the *Narendra Caritavaloka Pradi Pikava*.

In the reign of Mon-raza-Gri, a Lankan envoy bearing gifts arrived at Mrauk-u, and in return, the Arakanese king sent twenty Buddhists monks under the leadership of the Ven. Candravilasa Mahathero to Sri Lanka. On arrival there in November 1563, they staged a reformation campaign of the Buddhist Sangha and conducted the Ordination (*Upasampada*) at Udaku-khepa sima.

In the reign of Vimaladhamma Surya I (A.D. 1592-1604) when Sri Lanka was in need of learned monks to restore the Buddhist Sangha, the king sent a mission to Rakhangapura, specifically inviting the Arakanese

monk Nandicakka, one of the leading *theras*, and a figure so well-known that his fame even reached Lanka.

(This period was characterized by a serious set-back to Buddhism in Burma under Nanda Bayin, with the country then divided into a host of small states; Pegu, once a great centre of Theravada, was depopulated by famine, war and internal conflict.)

Shortly thereafter, King Min-khaung-raza (1621-1631)<sup>18</sup> ruled in Arakan. He appointed his son, Min-bar as Governor of Sandoway. Prince Min-bar selected the Ven. Tejosara, from Mrauk-u, to be sent on a religious mission to Lanka.

The Kings of Sri Lanka warmly received both the Nandicakka and Tejosara missions.

The *Culavamsa* and the *Sassanavamsa* each contain important evidential records of religious intercourse between Arakan and Sri Lanka during King Vimaladhamma Surya II's reign. Both chronicles refer to the arrival of the Sinhalese envoy in Rakhangapura<sup>19</sup> and the restoration of the Sri Lankan Buddhist Sangha by Arakanese monks.

After receiving another envoy sent by the Lankan King Vimaladhamma Surya II seeking religious assistance, the Arakanese king Maruppya (1606-97) selected the Ven. Indamanju, Abbot of Sattatthana monastery, as leader of a mission to Sri Lanka in 1696.<sup>20</sup>

Of the two, the Ven. Nandicakka was a leading Mahathera whose name must have been well-known to the Sri Lankans as a result of Sri Lanka's close connections to Arakan. His group was received with great honours and the *upasampada* ordination was conducted under the auspices of Ven. Nandicakka himself in the udakkhepasima (ordination hall) at Getambe near Peradanya in A.D. 1696.<sup>21</sup> Several members of the royal family and many other nobles received lay ordination at that time. Thus the Sri Lankan Buddhist Sangha was repeatedly restored by Arakanese monks.

Another ola leaf manuscript<sup>22</sup> recording religious intercourse between Arakan and Sri Lanka was discovered at Kadedora Vihara in Gannave Korale, Udahevhata, Sri Lanka, mentions Candivilasa and Nandicakka. The *Culavamsa*, however, does not speak of Candavilasa, but refers only to Nandicakka.<sup>23</sup> The *Sulu-paja-valiya* states the names of both Mahatheras.

Thus, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the relationship between Sri Lanka and Arakan had been critical to the re-establishment and restoration of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, specifically in the performance of religious ceremonies and higher ordinations.

<sup>1</sup> *Dipavamsa* vol.vii, p.18 and, p. 39-54.& *Mahavamsa* vol.v, p.195.

<sup>2</sup> W. Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 1966, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Mahavamsa* xxxiii, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> W.Rahula, op.cit. p.85

<sup>5</sup> *Vibhanga Atthagatha*, p. 314-318.& *Annguttara Nikâya Athakarathâ*, p.52.

<sup>6</sup> *Mahavamsa* , xxxiii, p.100-101 & *Dipavamsa* ,xx,p.45.

<sup>7</sup> *Rakhaing Magazine*, vol. iv, 1977, p.132.

<sup>8</sup> *Rakhaing-prene Phritsaing Thamaing Hmâ*, vol. i, 1984, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> K.L.Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*; 1982, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> *akhaing-prene Phritsaing Thamaing Hmâ*, vol.i, 1984, p. 120.

<sup>11</sup> *Rakhaing Magazine*, vol.iv, 1977, p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> *Epigraphia Indica*, xviii, 1925, p.133.

<sup>13</sup> Ashin Candamâlâlikâra, *Rakhaing Razawon Thee Kyan*, vol.i, 1931, p. 347.

<sup>14</sup> K.L.Hazra, op.cit. p.89.

<sup>15</sup> Ashin Candamâlâlikâra, op. cit.,vol.ii,1931, p.31.

<sup>16</sup> *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol.ii, 1952.

<sup>17</sup> Rakkhangapura means "Arakan"

<sup>18</sup> *Rakhaing-prene Phritsaing Thamaing Hmâ*, vol. i, 1984, p.124.

<sup>19</sup> *Culavamsa*, xciv, p. 15-16 & *Sassanavamsa*, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Rakhaing Magazine*, vol.iv, 1977, p.133.

<sup>21</sup> *Culavamsa*, xciv, p.15.

<sup>22</sup> *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of RAS*,vol.ii, 1952, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> *Culavamsa*, xciv, p.15.